

**My Best Day:  
Presentation of Self and Social Manipulation in Facebook and IM**

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**ABSTRACT**

By 2006, Facebook was the seventh most popular site on the Web, and registering on Facebook had become de rigueur on most American campuses. Facebook fills a variety of functions, including presentation of self to “friends” (through photos and text profiles) and the ability to control communicative access. Instant messaging, which is also highly popular with the same cohort, affords similar opportunities for self-presentation and manipulating social contact through profiles, away messages, buddy lists, and blocking. Drawing upon a study of Facebook usage and research on AIM away messages, this paper compares the evolving relationship between these two platforms.

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Walk into an average college dormitory, and wander down the halls. More often than not, the stark cinderblock or plasterboard is relieved by decorations – travel posters, likenesses of Bob Dylan, or maybe flyers advertising a used computer or bike for sale. Either on or next to the individual rooms, you commonly find a corkboard or whiteboard, on which messages of all ilk can be written either by or for the occupants. Sometimes personal photographs are posted, or maybe lyrics from a favorite song or a quotation from Marx or Monty Python.

These bulletin boards let students post timely messages for friends: “I’ve already gone to dinner” or “Wanna see the flick tonight?” Yet in practice, they often have a much richer function: enabling people to craft a presentation of self to a limited circle of friends (plus those with access to the hallway).

Back in the late 1950s and the 1960s, the sociologist Erving Goffman introduced the notion of “presentation of self” as a formal social construct. Goffman argued that in everyday life, people consciously or unconsciously present themselves to others as if they were actors on a stage. Do I want to appear assertive? vulnerable? sophisticated? available? From his Preface to *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959):

I shall consider the ways in which the individual in ordinary work situations presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them (p. xi)

Goffman’s work faded from prominence in the final decades of the twentieth century, but his notion of “presentation of self” has found a new audience among Internet researchers, who are interested in understanding how we use non-face-to-face media in establishing social rapport.

If personal bulletin boards are tangible devices by which students can communicate with classmates who are physically proximate, virtual platforms such as instant messaging and social networking sites (for example, Facebook or MySpace) offer additional outlets not just for conveying information or socializing, but also for constructing images of how they wish others to perceive them. In choosing a title for this paper, I have gratefully borrowed a phrase one student used in discussing how she thought about her Facebook page. “My best day,” she said, meaning that she could stage herself as she wished to be seen by her friends, not the way she often looked to herself.

It is this notion of staging, of “my best day,” that we explore in this paper. The two specific venues we will be considering are first, away messages in instant messaging and then Facebook.

Staging, or presentation of self, is, of course, just one of the ways in which we orchestrate social relationships with others. Another form of management is avoidance. If I do not want you to read my IM away message, either I can block you or not give you my screen name in the first place. If I want to avoid your seeing my profile on Facebook, I may refuse to “Friend” you and also adjust my Privacy Settings so you cannot find me via other Facebook search methods.

On a more positive note, some of our management of social relationships is wholly innocuous. Just as a whiteboard message may really be intended to let someone know the writer is at dinner or to find out if someone wants to go to a movie, many online messages are straightforward communiqués. An away message might inform a small group of friends that the person posting the message is out at class, or a Facebook profile could let readers know that the author is politically conservative. Much of our discussion probes the issue of social presentation of self, but other aspects of handling online interpersonal relationships often come into the mix.

## **SLEEPING ... OR AM I ☺: AWAY MESSAGES IN IM**

“Out of sight, out of mind”. While years of teaching have convinced me that today’s students know fewer and fewer aphorisms, the import of this one is readily understood by teenagers and young adults, as evidenced by the way they manipulate electronically-mediated communication. Yes, computers and mobile phones are prototypically used when people are out of sight from one another. But the art comes in not being “out of mind”. Mobile phones are ideal for 30-second calls (“It’s me. How you doing? I’m fine. Gotta go. Bye.”) or comparably short text messages (Hey. Lov ya”). With computers, away messages often play a similar role. Ostensibly, people putting up an away message are not at their computer. But their presence lingers through their words.

### **How Away Messages Work**

*Historical Note: The IM platform we are about to describe is America Online’s Instant Messenger, commonly known as AIM – but vintage late 2002. This was the system running when we collected the away message data we will be talking about in a moment. Other IM schemes are ICQ, MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, and Google Talk. Over time, the number of features on IM platforms has mushroomed to include voice and video, multi-party conversations, and the ability to send IMs to users not currently logged on.*

Away messages are part of a broad suite of IM functions that enable users not only to send synchronous messages to individuals but also to “present” themselves to members of their buddy

list or anyone knowing their screen name. These forms of presentation included screen names, profiles, buddy icons, expressions, emoticons, fonts and colors, and away messages.

The first three of these functions – screen names, profiles, and buddy icons – tend to be reasonably stable over time. Sometimes selection of screen names is seen as a creative act (such as the choice of “Swissmiss” – also the name of a hot-chocolate mix – by an American who had lived in Switzerland). Profiles and buddy icons enable users to create a persona (real or imagined) that they wish to reveal (or project) to others. A profile might contain information such as date of birth, hobbies, favorite movies, contact information, links to Web sites, or quotations. Buddy icons (visible in the instant messaging box during an IM conversational exchange) can be created independently or selected from a set of graphics that AOL provides. AIM Expressions are essentially coordinated electronic stationery. The “theme” you select (such as basketball or a pop star) shows up as a sidebar (or a light overall image) on many of the IM functions you are using. AIM offers a variety of pre-formed emoticons that can be inserted into an IM, a profile screen, or an away message. Similarly, users can customize fonts and colors when constructing text for IMs, profiles, or away messages.

Away messages were originally designed to enable AIM users who were still logged on to their computers but not physically sitting at their machines to alert possible interlocutors not to expect immediate replies to instant messages. For example, a person might have gone off to the bathroom, to get something to eat, or to attend class. During that user’s absence, an away message creates a social link with other members of the user’s messaging circle. As one female undergraduate put it, “Even if they are not chatting [on IM], you can still know all about someone’s life by reading their away messages”.

We can think of away messages as a form of “onstage” behavior in contrast to instant messaging conversations, which are more “backstage” activity (Erving Goffman’s terms, again). Gloria Jacobs argues that among American teenage girls, “the backstage conversations [that is, instant messaging] are where alliances are formed, problems are discussed and solved, and plans are made beyond the hearing of others ... [while] the onstage places [away messages] are where alliances are declared and social positions and presence are established” (Jacobs 2003:13).

AIM users know that a member of their online social circle has posted an away message by looking at the buddy list that appears on their screen. This list indicates not only which members of the list are currently online but also which ones (of those logged on) have posted away messages. A (virtual) yellow piece of paper next to a buddy’s screen name indicates that person has posted such a message. By clicking on the piece of paper, you can view what is written. AIM provides a default away message (“I’m away from my computer right now”), and hundreds of public-access Web sites list thousands of sample texts.

Knowing how away messages function, in principle, is one thing. But my students kept telling me that the actual use of away messages was not what the name would lead you to expect. I decided to find out what they meant.

### **THE IM AWAY MESSAGES STUDY**

In Fall 2002, the nineteen members of my undergraduate Honors Colloquium on “Language in the New Millennium” (taught at American University in Washington, DC) compiled a corpus of IM away messages that had been posted by students on their AIM buddy lists. Each student in the class collected data from two subjects, one male and one female, generating a total of 38

subjects. Five away messages were collected from each subject, yielding a corpus of 190 messages. A randomization process was used for selecting the screen names on the buddy list from which away messages were collected. Data collection took place over a two-week period.

In addition to assembling the away messages themselves, the student researchers calculated the average number of words per missive for each of their subjects, did a brief content and stylistic analysis of the messages, and offered their own snapshot view of their subjects' offline personalities. Several students also interviewed their subjects, eliciting the writers' rationales for constructing away messages.

The 190 samples yielded an array of styles and moods, a good deal of humor, and a substantial display of personal information. While subjects sometimes recycled their own away messages (since they can be saved), no one resorted to AIM's default away message or to public messaging sites. Our analysis also includes several examples that did not appear in the formal corpus but that student researchers had used or otherwise encountered in their prior experience with away messages. Such examples are indicated in the figures below with the notation "{not in corpus}".

### **Message Length and Gender**

We began by calculating the average length of the away messages. Length varied enormously across individual subjects, ranging from 1 word to more than 50. Among female subjects, the average length of an away message was 12.3 words. For males, it was 13.3.

Compared with IM transmissions (which average between 5 and 6 words – See Baron 2004), away messages are fairly long. Technology presents no barrier to producing substantial messages in either venue, given the ease with which text can be generated on a full computer

keyboard. What is more, students in both studies were accomplished computer users, with years of experience in writing papers, collecting research materials online, and composing email and instant messages. Why, then, were away messages so much longer than IM transmissions? One component of the explanation may be that away messages are one-shot deals, while several IM transmissions are often sent seriatim (and their cumulative word total is longer than 5 or 6 words). However, the more interesting part of the answer lies in the role away messages play in students' social lives.

### **Content Analysis**

A preliminary content analysis suggested separating the away messages into two major categories: Informational/Discursive and Entertainment. Each of these categories was then divided into subgroups:

#### Informational/Discursive:

- "I'm away"
- initiate discussion or social encounter
- convey personal information (about self, opinions, sense of humor)
- convey personal information to selected other(s)

#### Entertainment:

- humorous comments (including jokes, plays on words)
- quotations (from authors, songs, movies, TV shows, friends)
- links to Web sites

Because the sample size was small (190 messages), we did not undertake a statistical analysis of the data. Rather, we focused on understanding the spectrum of message types and, equally importantly, the communicative or social role these messages appeared to be serving.

While coding the data, we immediately noticed there was often a gap between the surface, or overt, meaning of an away message and the mood, tone, or ulterior motive involved. Think of the difference between denotative and connotative meaning. Denotatively, a message might indicate that although I still am logged on to IM, I have gone to the library, am not at my computer, and therefore will not be responding to messages you might send. But if the message says I am “In the bowels of hell...or what some would call the library,” I have connotatively relayed far more information.

For simplicity, I have organized the data here in terms of the overt function (such as “I’m away”) that the away message serves (think “surface” or “denotative”). Within each set of data, the actual social or communicative function of the away messages (think “underlying” or “connotative”) is then identified. Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 offer examples of the four types of Informational/Discursive away messages. Figure 5 summarizes the three categories of Entertainment away messages. A number of messages overlap categories (especially where humor or a quotation is involved). I have included such samples under the particular category being illustrated, though remaining mindful of their multi-functionality.

*Overt Function: “I’m Away”*

The first type of Informational/Discursive messages contains texts that overtly declare their authors are away from their computers and therefore not available to respond to instant

messages, despite still being logged on to AIM. Figure 1 summarizes the underlying social and communicative functions of these messages.

<u>Social/Communicative Functions</u>	<u>Examples</u>
I really am away	out In the bowels of hell...or what some would call the library. Sleeping ... don't bother
Itinerary	voter registration, peace corps meeting, class, class, choir, dinner, dorm council class till 1235, study for test until 205, test at 210, work from 5-1130
Randomly selected or generated message	cleaning my room [NOTE: sender has actually left the room] {not in corpus}
Remaining in the loop	Not here...Please leave me a message! Thanks. asleep...leave one
Lurking/filtering	Sleeping...or am I ☺ Maybe I'm doing work...maybe I'm not...the question of the night
Intentional misrepresentation	dinner with Mark and dancing all night [NOTE: sender actually in dorm alone watching TV] {not in corpus}

Figure 1. "I'm Away" Messages

Subjects in the study used three forms of away messages for the basic purpose of indicating their absence. The simplest ("I really am away") declares that the user is unavailable (for example, the message "out") or engaged in a specific activity or at a specific location (such as "the library"), thus accounting for the absence. A variant on this message type ("Itinerary") spells out the sequence of activities in which the sender will be engaged. While the level of detail may seem unnecessary, my students noted the social usefulness of informing friends how you are spending your day. Such specifics enable members of an online cadre to continue a conversation stream ("So how was your test?") rather than needing to begin a dialogue from scratch ("What did you do today?") when they resume IMing or encounter one another face-to-face.

Some AIM users care less about laying out their agendas than conveying the essential information that they will be unavailable. For this purpose, people sometimes grab whatever message from their saved arsenal they happen upon first (“Randomly selected message”). As one of my students explained, it is irrelevant if you are actually cleaning your room or off at a class, since in either event, you are unavailable.

Three variants of overt “I’m away” messages appear to be serving predominantly social functions. “Remaining in the loop” postings constitute requests for a message to be waiting when the individual posting the away message returns to active use of AIM. This “Remaining in the loop” function is similar to telephone voicemail (“I can’t take your call now. Please leave a message.”). Both media invite all comers to leave messages. However, in the case of voicemail, the caller has a particular interlocutor in mind. With away messages, the equivalent of the caller (that is, the person checking his or her buddy list to see which members of the list are online and who has posted an away message) may or may not be seeking to communicate with a specific individual. “Callers” can access the away messages of anyone online who is on their buddy list, thus using the system as a social checkpoint for assessing the status of a collection of people.

A second socially-motivated function of “I’m away” messages (“Lurking/filtering”) is monitoring incoming IM traffic, allowing people to decide which transmissions to respond to and which to ignore. An away message such as “Sleeping...or am I ☺” signals buddies there is some chance their IMs will be read (and responded to) immediately, but the recipient of such an IM is not obligated to do so. Apparently a number of college students post “I really am away” messages (such as “out”) when they are actually sitting at their computers. This ruse enables them to selectively ignore incoming IMs but to commence IMing if someone on the buddy list posts an engaging away message or sends an interesting IM.

The final group of socially-driven “I’m away” messages (“Intentional misrepresentation”) enables senders to construct a self-image through use of creative license. Although we could not confirm examples of such usage in the database, class researchers reported cases in which friends posted away messages detailing socially impressive activities (such as an elaborate date with a desirable partner) when they knew, for example, that the sender was sitting at home watching TV. Since computer-mediated communication invites construction of new identities (with respect to age, gender, personality, nationality, and the like), it is hardly surprising to find fabrication of activities in away messages.

Given the ostensible function of away messages (to say that the writer cannot be reached on IM), why not sign off from AIM if you will not be responding to IMs? Part of the answer lies in the technology. The default setting of AIM triggers a sound whenever people log on or off, alerting everyone on their buddy list. While the default sound can be turned off, a visual icon still appears, showing a door opening or closing. My students suggested that such an intrusion was socially “too loud”. Not only are you noisily announcing your presence (when you log on) but you are inviting a deluge of IMs. Commenting on the “Lurking/filtering” function (or use of an “I really am away” message when you are not), students again noted the importance of social politeness. If you are on AIM but only want to converse with specific people, posting an away message and then only responding to IMs selectively is a way of not hurting the feelings of those whose IMs you ignore.

*Overt Function: Initiate Discussion or Social Encounter*

The second Informational/Discursive category of away messages invites communication in the immediate or near future by another electronic medium (such as a phone call, text message, or

IM) or a face-to-face conversation. Figure 2 summarizes the social and communicative functions of this group of messages.

<u>Social/Communicative Functions</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Reach me through a different medium	call my cell [phone] since I am never around, try TEXT MESSAGING me! Send it to [phone number]. I wanna feel the love!
Let's chat online	Please distract me, I'm not accomplishing anything sitting at my desk...im me...we'll talk...
Invite face-to-face contact	Attempting to get all of this work done...if anyone is feeling productive please feel free to come and help me out ☺ WANTED: One date to the DTD Grab-a-Date on Friday. Applications now being accepted. Preference given to candidates who are hot, smart and outgoing. :-D

Figure 2. Messages Inviting Virtual and Face-to-Face Contact

The first cluster of messages (“Reach me through a different medium”) entreats readers to initiate communication via some means other than the computer. Such pleas are direct attempts to remain in the social loop. Sometimes the primary benefactor is the person posting the away message (“I wanna feel the love!”) while at other times, posters report a sense of obligation to their buddies. In the words of one subject in the study, “I feel like I should be accessible. My cell phone is always attached. I don't want my friends to think there's a time when they can't reach me.”

A second cluster of texts (“Let's chat online”) invites buddies to IM the person posting the away message when he or she is working at the computer (“Please distract me”). This “boredom” function looks like an oxymoron, but it turns out to be an efficient means of broadcasting a request to a large number of possible readers in the hope that someone will respond. As with Lurking/filtering messages (from Figure 1), individuals posting away messages that solicit online chatting can select the incoming IMs to which they wish to respond. The third

set of away messages in this group (“Invite face-to-face contact”) also uses a broadcast approach, but this time soliciting someone’s physical rather than virtual presence.

*Overt Function: Convey Personal Information (About Self, Opinions, Sense of Humor)*

Students often create away messages with the clear intentions of conveying personal information. Figure 3 summarizes the underlying social and communicative functions of this category of messages.

<u>Social/Communicative Functions</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Current state, activity, or judgment of sender	Reading for once...the joy of being an English major is sooo overwhelming right now...(the sarcasm is very much intended) Yes, I am <u>that</u> good.
Opinions	You have very little say in your fate or what will eventually befall you, but don’t let that keep you from voting. Most girls would rather be beaten to death by a pretty boy, than touched by an ugly one. [NOTE: sent by female]
Sense of humor	I could easily be replaced with a dancing chimp...and at times I believe people would prefer the chimp (but then again, so would I) this chik needs filla [NOTE: Chick-Fil-A is one of the fast food shops on campus]

Figure 3. Messages Conveying Personal Information (About Self, Opinions, Humor)

Sometimes the information being conveyed is about the writer’s feelings regarding an ongoing activity (“Reading for once...the joy of being an English major”). Other messages express more general opinions (“You have very little say in your fate.”) But more often than not, if there is an opportunity for humor, the user takes it. (A good deal has been written about the major role of humor in CMC – see, for example, Baym 1995 and Danet 2001.) A student who left her IM program running while at dinner could have written “at dinner”. Instead, she combined the “I’m

away” function with personal wit, resulting in “this chick needs filla” (a play on the name Chick-Fil-A, an on-campus fast food shop).

*Overt Function: Convey Personal Information to Selected Other(s)*

The last Informational/Discursive subcategory is broadcasting to your entire online social group personal information that is intended for a specific person (or persons). Figure 4 summarizes the underlying social and communicative functions of this group of messages.

<u>Social/Communicative Functions</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Communicate intended for single individual	working at the multicultural bilingual center...Sam, we will hang later tonight!!! J I promise! “Let’s see what DC [= Washington, DC] can do for us” – Jane (out exploring the city) ...get well soon hot stuff :::sending good vibes:::: :-P
Communicate intended for group of “insiders”	Back in D.C. missing Houston very much ...Suz, Jan and Rick, thank you for an amazing weekend!

Figure 4. Messages Conveying Personal Information to Selected Other(s)

Why do some AIM users choose the public forum of away messages to convey information seemingly targeted to selective members of their buddy list? One explanation lies in AIM technology. As of Fall 2002, AIM users could not send IMs to anyone not signed on to the system. The only way to communicate with people logged off was through away messages, which could be accessed when the intended reader returned online. Another explanation is rooted in attitudes regarding privacy. One of the students we interviewed made clear that he writes what he feels like writing and does not care who sees it. Other students commented that they generally communicated through IM with a tight circle of friends, all of whom would likely know the

individuals named in an away message. Messages ostensibly written for just one individual were intentionally shared online with the larger group of friends.

Sometimes, the rationale for posting “private” messages is less friendship than public display. By addressing or referring to a significant other or particular friend in an away message, writers publicize their personal relationships, reminding members of their buddy list that they are the sort of people who have such friends. This public display function is similar to the use of “I’m away” messages containing intentional misrepresentation in order to impress others (such as claiming to be on a date when actually at home).

*Overt Function: Entertainment (Humor, Quotations, Links)*

The final group of away messages in our corpus is made up of postings primarily designed to entertain. Figure 5 presents examples, clustered by type.

<u>Type</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Humor	work rhymes with beserk and jerk. i lurk in the murk and do my work, ya big jerk. ok, I gotta go do some work now. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with
Quotations	“Good breeding consists of concealing how much we think of ourselves and how little we think of other people” – Mark Twain “Make a career out of humanity.” – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
Poems, song lyrics	I sleep just to dream her I beg the night just to see her That my only love should be her Just to lie in her arms :-D
Links	link to the website of a band, an actor or actress, a movie {not in corpus}

Figure 5. Messages for Entertainment (Humor, Quotations, Links to Websites)

Why do AIM users post away messages designed essentially to entertain? Once again, the answer is grounded partly in the technology and partly in the social goals and expectations of American college students.

Experienced users of email are familiar with “signature files”, which allow senders to automatically post at the end of their emails not only professional contact information but also pithy sayings or quotations. While instant messages themselves have no signature files, “Entertainment” away messages may serve comparable functions, in essence providing a platform for self-expression.

Many of my students – and their subjects – perceived entertainment to be an essential component of the entire away-message genre. One subject noted, “I like to make people happy with my messages”. Another indicated that since she enjoyed other people’s away messages that made her laugh, she tried to make her own words funny. A third said he likes to entertain people. Several others felt they had to justify themselves when their away messages were not funny or creative, typically explaining that they lacked time or energy to craft amusing postings.

### **How Senders View Away Messages**

We have seen that away messages have multiple functions, not all of which are revealed by the overt form of the messages themselves. Interviews with some of the 38 subjects offered insights regarding their senders’ intentions. We have already noted how important students felt humor was in creating away messages. Students also spoke about their personal motivations for writing these messages and about the ways in which they could manipulate the use for which the medium was originally designed.

### *Personal Motivations*

There was no consensus as to how much away messages should reveal or justify their author's whereabouts. Some users deemed it important to let potential conversational partners know why the person posting an away message was absent and how to locate him or her. Others felt strongly that specifying their precise location was an invasion of privacy.

Similarly, away-message users differed regarding the appropriate length of a message. While some advocated (and sent) one word messages, others scoffed at the "laziness" of such writers. In the words of one subject,

I don't appreciate/agree with people whose away messages consist of one word (such as 'away', 'sleeping', or 'work'). I know these people are more interesting than that, and away messages can be indicative of your mood, your state of mind, and what you're doing at the time. The best ones can do all 3.

### *Creative Manipulation of Away Messages*

Some users consciously manipulated the away-message genre to serve individual needs. For example, one interviewee noted that she only posts away messages when she is in her dorm room, working at her computer. (Her messages included the likes of "Eating the souls of my fellow man" and "\*sigh\*") For her, away messages were a way of expressing personal information (sometimes humorously) about her current state, perhaps to generate conversation with people viewing her messages.

The flip side of using these messages to express your feelings is to craft messages that intentionally camouflage your state of mind. One subject commented that she posts quotations when she does not feel like talking or "giving away too much information". The same individual

reported using self-deprecation (“I could easily be replaced with a dancing chimp” – Figure 3) when “it has been a long day” and she does not want to go into the details of why. Another woman revealed that she uses humor to mask her stress level in order not to bother friends with her troubles, but at the same time hinting that not all is well.

### *Prescriptions for Constructing Away Messages*

Several of the people interviewed offered overall assessments of how away messages should be constructed. One asserted, “I figure away messages should either make you think, laugh, or tell you where I am...and sometimes they’re just random.” Another said, “I believe away messages should be funny, informative, and reflect who you are.” A comprehensive summary of how to construct an away message was posted in the AIM profile of someone on the buddy list of a member of the student research group:

it is important not to underestimate the value of a good away message. too much internet time is wasted by people reading mediocre/poor away messages. a few rules to go by:

- 1) no one word away messages - EVER
- 2) quotes/lyrics, unless appropriately timely, are a poor excuse for away messages and make the writer look like a hack
- 3) humor is the only way to go- i'm not looking for a deeper understanding of life, or a little tug on the heart strings from my instant messenger
- 4) keep inside jokes inside
- 5) announcements are alright, however they should be followed by something humorous

- 6) if you're using colors, do so tastefully
- 7) don't leave your cell phone number. people aren't looking at your away message to contact you, they're looking at it cause they're bored out of their mind writing some paper
- 8) no freakin emoticons

### **IM in the Age of Facebook**

The subjects in our study had devised an intricate culture of away messages, capable of expressing a wide array of meanings. But like fashions in food or vacation spots, practices in computer-mediated communication also change with the times. The away-message data were collected in Fall 2002. Between then and now, the online communication scene evolved enormously. One of the biggest changes has been the proliferation of social networking platforms that enable groups of people to establish online social affinities using tools such as profiles and messaging that are in some ways reminiscent of IM. Among the college crowd, the most important of these new platforms has been Facebook.

### **MY BEST DAY: FACEBOOK EVOLVES**

What do Bill Gates, Michael Dell, and Mark Zuckerberg have in common? All three dropped out of school to start computer (or computer-based) enterprises. Microsoft and Dell Computer need no introduction. But what about Zuckerberg? (Our Facebook history draws upon Cassidy 2006.)

In the Fall of 2002, Mark Zuckerberg entered Harvard. A computer-programming aficionado since his middle-school days, Zuckerberg soon created a Web site called Flashmash,

which invited Harvard viewers to rate the attractiveness of fellow students, whose pictures he posted online. The University was not amused, shutting down the site. But Zuckerberg moved on to other programming ventures whose reach extended far beyond Cambridge.

Like planets aligning, several factors came together that led to the emergence of Facebook. By Fall 2003, the first generation of social networking sites such as Friendster and Tribe.net were developing significant followings. Launched in beta form in Fall 2002, Friendster had over 5 million registered accounts by early January 2004 (Boyd 2004). On Friendster, users post profiles of themselves, write public testimonials about other users, and then browse the system in search of “Friends”. As Danah Boyd explains, Friendster was created to compete with online dating sites such as Match.com. What made Friendster different was that rather than cruising blindly among the postings, you worked through friends of friends.

American colleges and universities have long sought ways for their students to get to know one another. The venerable freshman “Facebook” has been a fixture on college campuses for decades. Entries for each student typically include name, mug shot, date of birth, high school, hometown, and maybe college dorm address, potential major, and hobbies. In fact, by the time Zuckerberg was a sophomore, Harvard was considering putting its traditional “Facebook” online.

But then fate intervened. In November 2003, Zuckerberg was approached by three seniors who asked if he would do the programming for a social networking site they were developing for Harvard students, along the lines of Friendster. What happened over the next few months is murky. (Those three seniors subsequently sued Zuckerberg for theft of intellectual property.) What is clear is that on February 4, 2004, TheFaceBook.com went online. By the end of the month, more than three-quarters of the undergraduates at Harvard had signed up.

TheFaceBook (later renamed simply Facebook) really did spread like wild fire. It first launched in a handful of other schools (Stanford, Columbia, and Yale). By June 2004, there were 40. In September, the number of users was up to a quarter-million. Within a year, Facebook had become the second-fastest-growing major site on the Internet – surpassed only by MySpace, the general-audience social networking site that had come online a month before Facebook.

Facebook quickly swept across nearly all four-year colleges and universities in the US. In September 2005, Zuckerberg opened the site to high schools – at first, without links to the college version, but later merging the two. By the time the next academic year (2006) rolled around, Zuckerberg took the lid off of Facebook, making it available to “corporate” and “regional” networks around the world – in essence, to anyone with an email address. In a moment, we will examine some of the motivations behind these expansions.

Most of what we know about Facebook usage comes from the period between 2005 and mid-2006, when the overwhelming majority of users were American college students, the audience for which the site was designed. Some of the data come from the handful of academic studies of Facebook (including one of my own), but other information can be gleaned from interviews with Zuckerberg or statements posted on the Facebook Web site. Given how quickly Facebook is evolving, our depiction only claims accuracy as of Fall 2006.

### **The Features on Facebook**

The main social-networking features of Facebook cluster into three categories: information about yourself, social affiliations, and online interaction. Facebook also provides a collection of Privacy Settings allowing users to block the prying eyes of people they wish to keep out. Our

description of Facebook features only captures the highlights, not every last option, such as posting Spring Break plans or all the privacy permutations.

### *Information about Yourself*

Like any self-respecting facebook, Facebook opens with a picture. (If the user chooses not to post one, the site provides a question mark in its stead.) People also have the option of uploading photo albums, typically containing pictures including the user, along with his or her real-life friends or acquaintances.

The major location for user information is the Profile. There is the expected basic information (sex, birthday, and hometown), along with college-minded categories such as “Relationship Status” and “Political Views”. Contact information options include AIM screen name, mobile phone number, mailing address, and Web site. Then come the personal settings, where people may, for example, write about their activities and interests; indicate preferences in music, books, TV shows, and movies; and offer up favorite quotations. Other settings include places for identifying current and former academic information (field of study, high school attended) and now employment details.

Online communication invites the use of assumed identities –pre-teen girls pretending to be twenty-something and middle-aged men posting as ingénues. In principle, Facebook is different, because at least until recently, you needed an .edu email address to register, which you only possessed if you were registered at a college or university. (For the moment, we put aside faculty and staff.) If you said you were Jaime L. Hernandez, a sophomore studying biology at the University of Arizona, you probably were. Facebook itself mandates truth in packaging by prohibiting users from impersonating “any person or entity”.

If this rule is being followed, then Karl Marx, Anne Boleyn, and Kermit the Frog are alive and well. Those of us working in university communities should not be surprised to learn that a small but substantial number of Facebook pages are “owned” by personages who do not correspond to the people taking classes and paying tuition. As of December 2, 2006, there were 17 Karl Marxes out there, four Anne Boleyns (including one at the University of Chicago with 306 Friends), and seven Kermit the Frogs. By comparison, Socrates of Athens only managed three doppelganger, and they were all faculty members (at Boston University, Michigan, and Bryn Mawr).

### *Social Affiliations*

Once you have an identity, you can begin forming social linkages. The primary way to build online social relationships is by “Friending” someone else on Facebook. That person receives an old-fashioned email with the request, which must be accepted or declined on Facebook itself. The number of “Friends” people have on Facebook typically ranges from a handful to many hundred.

A second way of forming social affiliations is by joining a “Group”. Groups may exist in the real world (such as the Podunk University Women’s Volleyball Team) or only in the fertile imaginations of the beholders. Some of my favorites include “I Went to Private School But Liberal Guilt Makes Me Slightly Embarrassed to Admit It,” “Jon Stewart for President,” “Poke or Be Poked,” and “I Want to Be One of Erin’s Super Friends!”.

### *Online Interactions*

Facebook à la mid 2006 offered three methods for interacting with other people online. The first is the personal Message, which works like an email: It is sent asynchronously, and it arrives in your Facebook account. Without logging on to Facebook, you do not know there is a message for you. The second method is the Wall, a kind of electronic whiteboard, of the sort we talked about at the opening of this paper. Occasionally, people post on their own Wall (sort of like an away message), but usually it is other people who write on yours. If someone writes on your Wall, you receive an email alerting you.

And then there is Poke, a tool Zuckerberg invented with no pre-attached function. When I “Poke” someone, that person will receive a message on Facebook saying “Naomi Baron poked you”. What does it mean to Poke someone or be Poked? Anything from “Hi” to “I’m trying to annoy you” to “I’m interested. Shall we get together?”

### *Privacy*

Over time, Facebook has introduced an ever-larger range of Privacy Settings, through which users can prevent other Facebook denizens from accessing particular information on their Facebook pages. As with IM, you may block specific people outright from seeing anything about you on Facebook or you may give groups of individuals limited access. For example, anyone might be able to find you on a general Facebook search but only undergraduate “Friends” at your own university would be able to see your particular list of Friends.

### **Facebook Users**

Who uses Facebook? Millions and millions of people. According to comScore Media Matrix, in 2006, Facebook was the seventh most popular site on the entire Web with respect to total page

views. According to Facebook, the typical user spends about 20 minutes per day on the site, and two-thirds of those with accounts log on at least once a day (Cassidy 2006).

Now that Facebook has opened its virtual doors to the world beyond American colleges (and high schools), it seems likely that while the number of users will continue to grow, average time logged on may not. Intel and PricewaterhouseCoopers gained access to Facebook in late April 2006, but it is hard to imagine executives spending their days checking other people's Profiles or Poking "Friends".

### **Why Use Facebook?**

Facebook was originally created as a cross between a tool for meeting new people and a platform for networking with people you already know. The "About Facebook" section of the Facebook site sounds somewhat more lofty:

Facebook is a social utility that helps people better understand the world around them. Facebook develops technologies that facilitate the spread of information through social networks allowing people to share information online the same way they do in the real world.

The social networking part rings true. How Facebook "helps people better understand the world around them" is a more amorphous claim, to say the least.

What is, however, certain about Facebook is the control it offers its users. In an interview with John Cassidy that appeared in the *New Yorker*, Zuckerberg suggested that

The way you [increase the information supply] is by having people share as much information as they are comfortable with. The way you make people comfortable is by giving them control over exactly who can see what.

Zuckerberg went on:

People want access to all the information around them, but they also want complete control over their own information. These two things are at odds with each other. Technologically, we could put all the information out there for everyone, but people wouldn't want that because they want to control their information.

Communication technologies are increasingly offering people the opportunity to manage their terms of interpersonal linguistic engagement. Facebook ratchets up this control a notch further by letting users orchestrate what information they are willing to share about themselves with one another.

Facebook also affords its users another kind of conversational clout by minimizing the amount of time you need to spend in communicating with someone else. We probably all know acquaintances who sometimes favor voicemail or email over face-to-face communication (even with close friends) to eliminate the time that otherwise would need to go into social pleasantries. American college students sometimes prefer to send text messages on their mobile phones rather than make a voice call for precisely the same reason (Baron and Ling 2007). Facebook users have discovered that the site offers them similar control. In Cassidy's words, "One of the reasons that the site is so popular is that it enables users to forgo the exertion that real relationships entail". Cassidy quotes a recent Harvard graduate who explains why Facebook is such an effective way of keeping up with former classmates: "It's a way of maintaining a friendship without having to make any effort whatsoever" (2006).

Finally, the control theme surfaces in users' ability to stage their presentation of self on their Facebook pages however they choose. The way you, quite literally, picture yourself is your

call. So, too, is how you describe your tastes in music, reading, and politics. Chris Hughes, who works for Facebook, explains that the site is “not about changing who you are. It’s about emphasizing different aspects of your personality.” (Cassidy 2006). Users clearly have gotten the message. In a study of Facebook several of my students did in Fall 2005, one of the women interviewed explained that a Facebook Profile “can be more an expression of who one wants to be rather than who one really is.” Indeed, me “on my best day”.

### **Who Owns Facebook?**

If you ask a group of college students “Who owns Facebook?”, you will likely be met with a quizzical moment of silence, followed by, “We do.” In the eyes of its users, the site is much like pebbles on the beach, there for the taking. No one “owns” the Internet; Wikipedia is freely open for all to read and contribute to; Google does not charge users for its services. Facebook is a social networking tool, whose content is shaped by all those people with Facebook accounts. So they collectively “own” it, right?

Not so fast.

In the world of social networking sites, the question of ownership has loomed large since Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. paid \$580 million for MySpace in 2005. That figure paled before the \$1.6 billion Google laid out for YouTube in October 2006. While Zuckerberg still retained control over Facebook as of December 2006, he had been looking for a buyer willing to pay \$2 billion.

The issue of who owns Facebook came to the fore the first week of September 2006, when Facebook launched two new features: News Feeds and Mini-Feeds. Both tools provided updates on changes that “Friends” had made to their own pages. The idea of bringing such

“news” directly to you has its origin in the online world with news aggregators or RSS feeds more generally that automatically show up in your email in-basket, after you have requested stories on particular topics such as earthquakes or the stock market. Here is how Facebook described its own additions (“Facebook Gets a Face Lift”, from the Facebook site on September 5, 2006):

News Feed highlights what’s happening in your social circles on Facebook. It updates a personalized list of news stories throughout the day, so you’ll know when Mark added Britney Spears to his Favorites or when your crush is single again....Mini-Feed ...is similar, except it centers around one person. Each person’s Mini-Feed shows what has changed recently in their profile and what content...they’ve added....News Feed and Mini-Feed are a different way of looking at the news about your friends

Different indeed! If the Dow plummets 100 points, that constitutes news that you probably want to know about when you log on to your computer. But Mark adding Britney to his Favorites list? I may barely know Mark (whom I Friended just for the heck of it, but have never met). Do I want to be assaulted by news of his taste in pop stars when I fire up Facebook?

Millions of Facebook users did not think so. Within one day of the new features being added, tens of thousands of users had already signed online protest petitions. Students on campuses across the country spoke of little else. They contemplated boycotts. They felt personally betrayed. What right had Zuckerberg to push information upon them that they had not asked for?

Zuckerberg was, apparently, surprised at the outcry. Just one day after launching the feeds, he acknowledged the need to respond, which he did in a Facebook posting entitled “Calm Down. Breathe. We Hear You.” His tone was that of an owner. While he admitted that “we know

that many of you are not immediate fans” of the new feeds, he went on to remind Facebook users that this information was available anyway. All he had done was “nicely reorganize[] and summarize[] so people can learn about the people they care about.”

Well, sort of. If you have several hundred “Friends”, each of whom makes one change to his or her site every few days, you are barraged with an enormous amount of “news” that is essentially spam. What is more, the Privacy Settings on which Facebook prided itself were not properly in place with the original launch of the new feeds. Facebook users refused to “calm down”. Zuckerberg found himself having to change tactics. His “Open Letter” of September 8 was written not in the voice of an owner but of an apologist:

We really messed this one up....we did a bad job of explaining what the new features were and an even worse job giving you control of them. I'd like to try to correct those errors now.

Apology was then followed by contrition:

This may sound silly, but I want to thank all of you who have written in and created groups and protested. Even though I wish I hadn't made so many of you angry, I am glad we got to hear you.

And then the final olive branch:

About a week ago I created a group called Free Flow of Information on the Internet, because that's what I believe in – helping people share information with people they want to share it with....Today (Friday 9/8) at 4pm edt, I will be in that group with a bunch of people from Facebook, and we would love to discuss all of this with you. It would be great to see you there.

Try envisioning Rupert Murdoch posting this kind of missive on MySpace.

Admittedly, Zuckerberg was, at the time, only a year or two older than his average Facebook user. But he was also a savvy owner and operator. During the period from December 2005 through March 2006, the number of unique visitors to Facebook was largely flat. (According to comScore Media Matrix, 12.4 million versus 12.9 million). Since Facebook profits come from ad revenues, and ad sales are pegged to site usage, Zuckerberg clearly needed a new strategy. Allowing businesses and other organizations (both within and outside of the US) was one element. The new feeds was another. The independent blog [www.insidefacebook.com](http://www.insidefacebook.com) reported on October 12, 2006 that Zuckerberg's gamble paid off: "According to Alexa [a Web information company], Facebook's page view numbers...have dramatically increased by over 40% in the last month alone."

The September Surprise ended in a win-win situation. Zuckerberg's business prospered, and its users came away feeling they still owned Facebook.

### **Why is Facebook Interesting?**

Not being a venture capitalist, my interest in Facebook lies in understanding the ways in which young people use the platform to construct and conduct social interaction with peers. I have been especially intrigued by the choices students make that enable them to control their terms of discourse with others. While I had heard many anecdotes from my students and gained a little first-hand experience by creating my own Facebook account (and gratefully welcoming my generous students, and my college-aged son, who were willing to Friend me), I had no substantive, objective data. (By late 2006, a number of academic studies of Facebook had begun to appear, including Acquisti and Gross 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2006; Golder,

Wilkinson, and Huberman 2006; and Vandeen Boogart 2006. My own analysis here references these studies.)

As we saw in the first half of this paper, teenagers and young adults were already manipulating the terms of online linguistic engagement through instant messaging long before Facebook arrived on the scene. Since both IM and Facebook can be used for presentation of self and for managing social relationships, I wondered how college students divvied up their communication on the two platforms.

The way to find answers was to do a study.

### **THE FACEBOOK STUDY**

In the Spring of 2006, I constructed a paper-based questionnaire, with input from a number of undergraduates. We collected 60 sets of responses (30 from males and 30 from females). Our questions fell into eight broad categories:

- Demographics (including how long you have used Facebook)
- General Usage Patterns (how often you use Facebook and for what functions)
- Information about Yourself (what is in your Profile)
- Social Affiliations (Friends and Groups)
- Online Interactions (Messages, the Wall, and Poke)
- Attitudes towards Access (should non-students, including parents, be able to access your site)
- Privacy (what, if any, Privacy Settings do you use)
- IM versus Facebook (for which platform do you use which function)

We also provided respondents the opportunity to offer additional comments.

Here is what we found.

### **Demographics**

Our subjects were undergraduates with an average age of about 20 years, 6 months. Although the mean age for males and females was essentially the same, males had logged more experience with Facebook (nearly a year and a half, on average) compared with females (closer to a year).

### **General Usage Patterns**

Overall, 55% of our subjects logged on to Facebook least daily, though females slightly outpaced males (60% versus 50%). Recall that Facebook-the-company reports that two-thirds of users log on at least once a day.

Facebook also indicates that the typical user spends about 20 minutes per day on the site. At Michigan State University, a study by Nicole Ellison, Charles Steinfield, and Cliff Lampe found that undergraduates averaged between 10 and 30 minutes daily. Our students spent more, averaging over 40 minutes a day. Again, females were slightly heavier users, averaging almost 45 minutes compared with males, who (on average) clocked in at 40.

We also wanted to know how many people's Facebook pages our students looked at in a 24-hour period. The answer: about 7, with females looking at slightly more pages than males.

### **Information about Yourself**

Our next questions focused on how often students tweaked the information they posted about themselves. To look at the Facebook news feeds, it might feel as if students are continually

updating their pictures, albums, or personal data. In fact, they are not. Fewer than 5% changed pictorial information at least several times a week, and only a smidge more (6.7%) altered personal data with that frequency. These data correspond reasonably closely to findings in a Facebook study that Matthew Vanden Boogart also did in Spring 2006, involving students on four university campuses. Although Vanden Boogart's survey used different time intervals from mine, he found that less than 2½% of his subjects altered their profiles either hourly or weekly.

Why, then, do those receiving Facebook news feeds perceive so much change? Because they have so many Friends.

### **Social Affiliations**

The notion of "Friend" on social networking platforms has generated a good deal of buzz. From the perspective of many youthful Facebook users, the more Friends the merrier. You may or may not actually know the people who ask to "Friend" you – or vice versa. But so what? Like sports trophies, what matters is that they pile up. Some of my students have confided that when they first contemplated joining Facebook, they were embarrassed that they would have a paltry number of Friends linked to their name. At the extreme, among some groups of real-life friends, the volume of Facebook Friends you amass is a point of competition, with the numbers edging into the thousands.

How many friends does an "average" Facebook user have? There is considerable variation from clique to clique, campus to campus, age-group to age-group, and across time. Our sample yielded an overall average of 229 friends, with males substantially edging out females (males: 263; females: 195). Vanden Boogart's average came out at 272. A study by Scott Golder, Dennis Wilkinson, and Bernardo Huberman, which encompassed millions of Facebook accounts,

calculated 178. The Michigan State study found the number was between 150-200 (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2006).

Given how casually most Facebook users accept “Friends”, I was curious to see how these online trophies measured up with students’ circles of “real” friends. After asking how many Facebook Friends our subjects had, we followed up with this question: “Of these ‘Friends’, how many are real friends (e.g., you might go to a movie or dinner together)?” Not surprisingly, the numbers plummeted. Females reported an average of 65 “real” friends, and males, an average of 78, yielding an overall average of 72 people with whom the students might actually socialize. The number 72 is a far cry from 229.

While amassing Facebook Friends can be an online sport, joining (or starting) Facebook Groups introduces elements of humor and sometimes audacity. Who would not want to be a member of “Erin’s Super Friends”, or how many rebellious freshmen would not be tempted to join Groups with names containing language their mothers forbade them from using? Yet unlike Facebook Friends, the numbers of Facebook Groups students join is more restrained. Our subjects averaged 15 Facebook Groups apiece (males: 17; females: 14). Vanden Boogart reported almost double that number – an average of 27, with the disparity between 15 and 27 probably reflecting differences in campus culture.

Again, we wanted to distinguish between online and real-world activity. When we asked students, “Of these Groups, how many conduct offline activities (e.g., social, academic, athletic)?” the average shrank to barely 2.

## **Online Interactions**

Moving from social affiliations to online interactions, we probed how students made use of the Message feature on Facebook, of the Wall, and of Poke. Remember that in order to know you have been sent a Message on Facebook, you need to be logged on to your Facebook account. When someone has written on your Wall, you receive an email (but then need to log on to Facebook to see what has been written). If someone Pokes you, you must go on to Facebook to find out.

The Message function was used by students in our study, but not extensively. Only 6.8% of the subjects used it “several times a day” or “daily” (females more often than males), while 10% never used the feature at all. Among occasional users, females did somewhat more frequent messaging than males. Low use of the Message function is confirmed in the massive longitudinal study by Golder, Wilkinson, and Huberman, who logged the 284 Messages exchanged by 4.2 million Facebook users between February 2004 and March 2006. The verdict: An average of .97 Messages were sent per user per week (2006:3). In other words, less than one Message a week.

The Wall also received sparse traffic. Barely 8% made a Wall posting either “several times a day” or “daily” (the only people in this group being females). Fully 60% either “never” wrote on someone’s Wall or did it “less often than several times a week”. When students did post to someone’s Wall, they overwhelmingly did so to say “Hi” or to be funny. Only about a quarter of the subjects wrote on other people’s Walls either to give information or to continue a real conversation. The conversationalists were nearly twice as likely to be female (33% of females used the Wall for a conversation versus 18% of the males). Among those who did post to other people’s Walls, their main motivation for not sending an individual Message instead was “so other people can also see what I’m saying.” Only 4 out of the 60 subjects posted on their own Wall – and all were male.

Poke was another function with little usage. Only 10% used it “several times a day”, “daily”, or “several times a week”, while almost 53% never used it at all. Golder, Wilkinson, and Huberman also found a paucity of Pokes in their research: 79.6 million Pokes compared with 284 million Messages, which averages out to about one Poke per user every three weeks. Males in our study were slightly more likely to use “Poke”. A total of 40% of the females ever poked other people online, while roughly 55% of males did so. Those who used “Poke” reported that their primary reason was to return a Poke they had received, though others Poked to be cute, to be annoying, or less frequently, to say “Hi” or to flirt.

### **Attitudes towards Access**

At the time we did our study (Spring 2006), only people at educational institutions had access to Facebook accounts. That meant students, but it also meant faculty and staff. We were curious to know whether our subjects perceived Facebook to be “their” site, with faculty or staff members who had accounts seeming like interlopers.

While only colleges and high schools had official right of entry to Facebook, we knew that outsiders were sometimes gaining access as well. The news media were running stories about how potential employers, along with graduate and professional programs, were checking out Facebook pages as they screened candidates for jobs or admission (Finder 2006). Equally troubling to many students was the prospect that their parents might see their profiles and photos, many of which displayed diminished clothing and ample alcohol. Again, we asked students how they felt about such “outsider” access. All of these issues relate back to the question of ownership. Does Facebook “belong” to its student clientele (for whom the site was originally

created) or are students essentially visitors allowed to use the tools, but without say over what those tools are or, here, who else can watch how teenagers and young adults use them.

When it came to university faculty and staff, 60% of our subjects had no objection to their being allowed to join Facebook. Here are some of the comments we received:

Those answering “Yes:

“They [faculty and staff] are part of the university community. It makes things more friendly.”

“They are allowed to, but I don’t think we should get in trouble for things depicted on facebook.”

Those answering “No”

“The purpose of the medium is for college students to connect with one another.

Any introduction of figures of authority will only serve to limit the speech and expression of individuals. Those people [faculty and staff] do not have the right to access your phone conversations or personal records, so facebook should be no exception.”

“Because it’s a student website.”

Actually, it is Mark Zuckerberg’s Web site, and he can assert any authority he pleases over it. He has no interest in limiting speech or expression, since free speech does not interfere with getting users’ eyeballs on ads.

The sentiment against allowing graduate or professional programs, or future employers, to access student Facebook profiles was much stronger: 75% thought it was a bad idea. Their reasons for objecting?

“incriminating evidence, this is not how I would represent myself to an employer,  
this is for my friends.”

“I don’t want them to see my pics””

Among those who had no problem with such access:

“I don’t have anything illegal”

“Because you choose what to portray yourself as on Facebook, so they’ll see more  
of who you actually are. It doesn’t have to be about incriminating photos.”

The last comment returns us yet again to the theme of presentation of self: If prospective employers are going to size you up through your Facebook page, why not create a site that enhances your employment prospects?

And then there was the question about parents: “Would you want your parents to see your Facebook page?” The resounding answer was “No”. In fact, only a lone female replied “Yes”. In retrospect, I realize that I should have provided a third possible response: “Don’t Care”. Reading some of the additional comments subjects wrote at the end of the questionnaire, it became clear that for at least some students, it did not matter whether their parents saw their Profiles and photos. One male student wrote:

“I am not dying for my parents to see the profile, but I would not care if they saw it.”

In the same vein, a female said that

“While I wouldn’t necessarily ‘want’ my parents to review my Facebook page, I  
certainly wouldn’t mind showing them if there were interested.”

Perhaps the “Don’t Care” group had innocuous Facebook pages. Or perhaps the students and their parents had already made their peace.

## Privacy Settings

As we explained earlier, Facebook offers a variety of Privacy Settings, enabling users to decide for themselves what cadre of people can view which portions of their Facebook postings. Over the months, the number of privacy options has increased. Similarly, settings that used to be buried on the Facebook site and confusing to use have become more transparent. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that many loyal Facebook users remain unaware of these changes.

We asked several sets of questions about privacy: Do you use “My Privacy” settings to restrict who can find you in a general Facebook search or who can see your Profile? Do you limit who can see your Contact Information? Do you block specific people on Facebook?

As of Spring 2006, 56% of our subjects restricted either the people who could find them in a Facebook search or who could see their Profile. (Interestingly, 21% did not know that Privacy Settings existed.) Roughly two-thirds of the students were willing to let anyone on Facebook find their basic page. However, students were somewhat more discerning about who could see their Profiles: While 77% gave access to fellow undergraduates on our campus, only 64% gave graduate students the nod, 50% gave alumni viewing privileges, 43% admitted faculty, and 41% allowed in staff.

We then asked whether students restricted access to personal Contact Information such as email address, AIM screen name, telephone number, or residential address. Their options: “My Friends”, “My School”, “Friends of Friends”. Thirty-three percent said “Yes”, they did restrict some access. Forty-five percent did nothing to limit visibility, and another 22% did not know Privacy Settings existed for this kind of information.

Facebook enables users to personalize privacy yet further by blocking specific individuals from accessing the user’s Facebook page. Only a handful of our 60 subjects – 4

females – used this option in Facebook. By comparison, on their instant messaging accounts, 26 students (17 females, 9 males) blocked specific individuals either in general or for a period of time.

The privacy issue is more complex than first meets the eye. Students who have the technological know-how to find their way easily around the Web are often oblivious even to the availability of ready tools for precluding relative strangers from accessing birthdates, hometowns, and current addresses and phone numbers. A study by Frederic Stutzman (2006) found that the 38 undergraduate and graduate (or professional) students he surveyed commonly were “OK with strangers accessing my [social networking communities] profile” – giving an average response of 3.15 on a 5 point scale, where 1 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. If students presume they “own” Facebook, understandably they sense no more need to put their information under privacy wraps than they feel compelled to put their clothes away if they live in a dormitory single.

Many students in the US maintain a curiously duopolistic attitude towards privacy. In a study of 189 undergraduates, Alessandro Acquisti and Ralph Gross established that when presented with a general survey about privacy attitudes, subjects displayed understandable apprehension:

The highest concern was registered for [the statement] “A stranger knew where you live and the location and schedule of the classes you take” (mean of 5.78 [on a 7-point Likert scale], with 45.58% choosing the 7<sup>th</sup> point in the Likert scale, “very worried” (Acquisti and Gross 2006:8)

However, a sizeable proportion of this same cohort provided their schedule of classes or address (or both) in their Facebook Profile. What is more, in Acquisti and Gross’ complete study (which

also included 74 graduate students, along with 31 faculty and staff), 33% maintained it would be “impossible or quite difficult for individuals not affiliated with a university to access [the] Facebook network of that university.” In the now-familiar words of one person interviewed, “Facebook is for the students.” (Acquisti and Gross 2006:18)

Yet as Acquisti and Gross argue, unwanted contact from strangers and even identity theft are accidents waiting to happen. In an earlier paper, the authors reported that of the more than 4000 students whose Facebook behavior they studied at Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) in June 2005, a miniscule “1.2% of users (18 female, 45 males)” changed the default visibility setting from “being searchable to everyone on the Facebook to only being searchable to CMU users” (Gross and Acquisti 2005). One year later, *Newsweek* noted that only 17% of all Facebook members ever made changes in Privacy Settings (Stone 2006).

It is human nature to believe that nothing bad can happen on your home turf. Unfortunately for its student users, Facebook is not just a virtual extension of their campus lives but an increasingly public site, owned by a newly wealthy twenty-something and potentially in the cross-hairs of ne'er-do-wells spotting an easy target.

### **IM versus Facebook**

Our final group of questions asked students to compare how they used instant messaging and Facebook. Since the two platforms have a number of overlapping functions (a place to develop a profile; an away message or Wall function for posting information available to a collection of people, a one-to-one messaging system), we wondered how students were balancing these instruments that were both ubiquitous in most of their lives. Students in a Facebook focus group I ran in February 2006 suggested that Facebook had largely replaced IM. Were they right?

*Total Daily Usage*

An obvious way to begin the comparison is to ask how much time students spend on IM versus Facebook per day. Our question asked, “On average, approximately how much time per day do you spend using IM and Facebook? Count time actually using IM or Facebook functions, not just having IM or Facebook open.”

We have already looked at the Facebook statistics, but here is how the daily averages, in hours, stack up in comparison with IM:

	<u>IM</u>	<u>Facebook</u>
Females	2.0	.73
Males	2.35	.60
Total	2.18	.67

The difference is stark: roughly three times as much time on IM as on Facebook. Males spent a tad more time on IM than did females, while the ratio was reversed for Facebook (females logging slightly more time than males).

While the overall IM versus Facebook distinctions are large, all the data need to be taken with ample grains of salt. Our numbers represent student estimates, not precise measurements. In the case of Facebook, students typically log on to use the site and then log off when they are done. While the site is open, their attention may switch to other pursuits. Some of these activities entail true multitasking – like roommates who sit in the same room, IMing each other about the Facebook Profiles they are reading. Other multitasking is more sequential – check out someone’s new photo album, have a phone conversation, add a Group to your own profile, load a new CD to iTunes, and only then close Facebook. IM poses an even greater challenge for accurately

reporting usage time. Many students keep IM open for hours (even days) on end. An enormous amount of multitasking goes on while college students have IM open – even while they are holding IM conversations (Baron In Press). Without keeping a 24-hour IM usage diary, it is hard to know how precise the two-hour figure might be. That said, since the same opportunities for error applied to both the IM and Facebook estimates, it is safe to conclude that responses accurately measure overall trends.

### *Profiles*

Our other two questions concerned use of profiles. One asked, “To get general information on someone you know, which profile (AIM or Facebook) do you look at first?” We also asked about updating your own profile: Do you update your AIM or Facebook profile more frequently?

The replies clearly suggested that Facebook is the place to go for profiles. Four-fifths of the students turned first to Facebook profiles to get information on another person, and two-thirds updated their Facebook profiles more frequently than their IM profiles. The only gender difference came with regard to information-seeking. More than 85% of females chose Facebook over IM as their first source of information, while the proportion for males was roughly 77%.

Despite the meteoric rise of Facebook as an online social tool, IM has hardly faded into the electronic woodwork. Instead, students are now assigning different functions to the two platforms. Facebook has largely become the network on which you present yourselves to others, while IM retains its role as the basic communication network between individuals. Support for this dichotomy comes from two sets of comments offered by students: subjects in the Spring

2006 study and interviews from a Facebook study that four of my students (Tamara Brown, Dan Hart, Kathy Rizzo, and Kat Waller) did in Fall 2005.

Several people commented on how they perceived the various tools available on IM or on Facebook for sending messages to people:

The students we interviewed tended to send a Facebook message when they wanted to communicate something private, but not immediate. They saw the message function to be like email.

An IM conversation with someone you'd rather not speak with, or whom you do not know, is seen as more of an invasion of privacy than a message via the more relaxed Facebook system.

The Facebook Wall provided another alternative to an IM or a Facebook Message:

[several students interviewed said they leave messages on someone's wall] when they wish to avoid talking to the person in question. [One woman gave the example of happy birthday messages]. She posted a happy birthday message on the wall of a casual friend rather than call or send an instant message because she did not want to start a conversation.

The wall is often used as a means of social avoidance; users try to keep up social ties without having to actually maintain them.

In the eyes of these students, the Facebook Wall provides a welcome tool for controlling the volume on a social relationship: I want to wish you “Happy Birthday” but do not actually want to talk with you.

Looking at the overall relationship between Facebook and IM, the Fall 2005 student research project probably summed it up best:

The Facebook ...allows the person to maintain a presence in an online community from a distance. Being someone’s friend or joining a group carries no obligation or responsibility....AIM takes on a more personal role, similar to that of a phone number or physical address...[While Facebook enables you to present yourself on your best day], AIM is a direct line to the user and their state of mind at any given time.

### **The Gender Question**

Throughout our discussion of Facebook, we have noted small but consistent gender differences in how the platform is used. In an earlier study of college student IM, I observed a number of divergences in the instant messaging conversations that male and female college students construct (Baron 2004). Of particular relevance here are the findings that females averaged longer IM conversations and used longer closing sequences before the final goodbye was said. Moreover, the literature on gender and language repeatedly argues that females are more prone than males to use both spoken and written language for social interaction.

The Facebook data are consonant with these trends. On Facebook, females were more likely to log on daily, spent a little more time each day on Facebook, sent slightly more Messages, were more likely to continue “real” conversations on the Wall, and were a little more likely to get information on people via Facebook Profiles (rather than IM) than were males. All

this, despite the fact that males averaged longer experience with Facebook than females (roughly a year-and-a half versus a year). Given our sample size, almost none of these differences was statistically significant. Yet in raw numbers, the gender patterns were tantalizingly consistent.

We also observed that males in our study reported spending a little more time actively using IM than did females. While I do not have “pre-Facebook” comparative statistics on IM daily usage, by gender, it is possible that females are now moving some of their social-communicative functions from the IM platform to Facebook. Alternatively, they may be augmenting the earlier medium with the newer one.

### **SOCIAL NETWORKING FOR ALL?**

Is social networking for everyone? Judging from the numbers, it is easy to think so. By June 2006 – before taking the lid off membership requirements, Facebook had about 15 million visitors a month. These numbers pale before MySpace traffic: 21.8 million visitors in August 2005, which soared to 55.8 million by mid 2006 (comScore Media Matrix).

People are not the only ones getting in on the act. Dogster.com launched in 2004, and as of December 2006 had 229,372 members – each of which had its own Web page, complete with a profile including a Biography, Pet Peeves, Favorite Toys, Favorite Food, Favorite Walk, Best Tricks, and even a list of Groups to which the pooch belonged. Catster.com follows the same format, clocking in at 97,402 members near the end of 2006. Personally, I have not seen pigs fly nor dogs and cats logging on to computers. The heavy lifting is left to the pets’ owners (or friends and family), who participate vicariously in the social network (*Newsweek* July 17, 2006, p. 12).

Not everyone, even of college age, is enamored with online social networking. Estimates from Facebook itself and from external studies suggest that between 80 to 90% of students on campuses have Facebook accounts. In February 2006, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that 80-85% of undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin were on Facebook (along with 2-5% of faculty and staff) (Gonzales 2006). The numbers at Carnegie Mellon were slightly lower: 70% by late 2005 (Peters 2006). Michigan State (as of April 2006): over 90% (Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe 2006). What about the rest?

Some students have no interest in joining in the first place. Others join but later drop out. Discussions with students who have opted out suggest their decisions are usually motivated by one or two factors (or a combination). The first is time. Facebook can be a dangerous tool for procrastinating – when you should be cleaning your room, writing a paper, or studying for an exam. Vanden Boogart notes that of the 2851 undergraduates he surveyed, 31.3% either “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” with the statement “I feel addicted to Facebook” (2006:38). As one student wrote, “Facebook, I hate you!” – for sapping so much of her attention.

The second reason students give for shunning Facebook is privacy. They have no desire to post a staged photograph, to give out their birth date or political affiliation to people they barely know, or to subject themselves to Pokes or to “news” flashes when one of their “Friends” updates a Profile.

But at least among college students, those who say “No” to online social networking have been in the minority. Much as a student in the IM away messages study said she owed it to her friends to let them know her whereabouts when she was not physically in front of her computer, a subject in my Facebook study wrote that “It allows people I know to see what I am up to”. For

substantial numbers of people, online communities allow them to see and be seen. And by controlling what information is posted, users can help ensure they will be seen on their best day.

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